

“The Seed Time of Gay Rights”

**Rev. Carol Cureton,
the Metropolitan Community Church, and
Gay St. Louis, 1969-1980**

Rodney C. Wilson



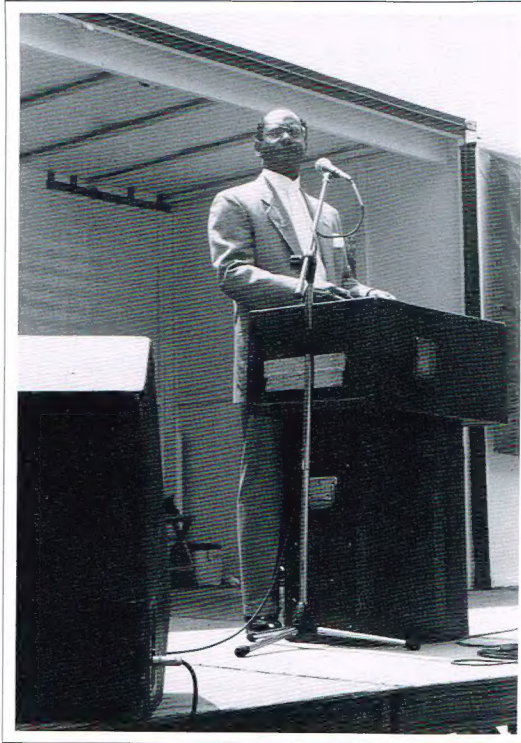
I took a cork out of a bottle, I think, that had so much energy, and so much giving in it that it spilled out all over St. Louis. . . . I don't deserve any more credit than somebody scattering a bunch of seeds.

—Carol Cureton,
November 13, 1993

On June 27, 1993, Mayor Freeman Bosley, Jr., spoke to gays, lesbians, and their supporters gathered in Forest Park at the concluding festival of Lesbian and Gay Pride Month. He offered this assurance: "I want you to know today that if anyone comes for you, I'll speak up." The crowd of thousands cheered, understanding that Bosley, by announcing his position as heterosexual ally to the city's homosexual minority, had just made history. That same day Mayor Bosley announced that he would appoint long-time human rights activist Laura A. Moore to the Civil Rights Commission, the panel which oversees the city's Civil Rights Enforcement Agency; this action made Moore the first openly lesbian or gay person ever appointed to citywide office.¹

Bosley became the first St. Louis mayor to positively acknowledge his gay and lesbian constituents. Before Bosley the only city-sanctioned authorities to meet with homosexuals in Forest Park were police officers determined to arrest them for actual or perceived violations of city ordinances. A twenty-five-year journey into the past illustrates some of the evolutionary and revolutionary changes that created a homosexual community with sufficient clout to beckon the mayor to a gay pride festival.

In the late 1960s, St. Louis possessed no publicly visible gay community, and for the most part heterosexual St. Louisans viewed homosexuality as sinful, sick, or criminal. Patrons of gay institutions lived in fear of police raids and, along with most homosexuals, feared public exposure of their private lives.² In explaining why this changed and why gays and lesbians began creating open communities in the 1970s, historians have focused on several factors, including post-World War II urbanization, the



Mayor Freeman Bosley speaking at the 1993 Lesbian and Gay Pride Festival. Photograph by Mark Skinner, 1993. Courtesy of the Lesbian and Gay News-Telegraph.

1960s climate of political and sexual liberation, and the Stonewall Rebellion of 1969. Urbanization, for example, was crucial to the development of gay meccas; historian Margaret Cruikshank states that the anonymity provided by crowded urban environments "created possibilities for living permanently outside of the traditional family structure."³ Equally, the increasing acceptability of birth control, divorce, and out-of-wedlock cohabitation created an environment in which all forms of sexuality, including homosexuality, became far less taboo than they had been previously. Furthermore, women's liberation sanctioned women's desire to live separately from men and to choose women as partners—"women's liberation told women that they could be heterosexual, homosexual, bisexual, or asexual and that these choices were equally valid." Finally, coming in the midst of the social

Facing: Rev. Carol Cureton, first pastor of the Metropolitan Community Church in St. Louis. Photograph by Wilbur Wegener, 1975. © Wilbur Wegener, 1994.

Rodney C. Wilson is a graduate student in History at University of Missouri-St. Louis and a teacher at Mehlville High School.

turbulence of the 1960s, bar patrons' refusal in June 1969 to cave in to police harassment at the Stonewall Inn in New York City's gay district sparked a gay liberation movement across the country; Stonewall—an episode often compared with the 1955 refusal of Rosa Parks to relinquish her bus seat to a white man—has been called “the shot heard round the homosexual world.”⁴

All of these factors played an important role in the national gay civil rights movement and made more probable the rise of gay rights movements in cities throughout the United States. In St. Louis, however, an institutional catalyst was needed for the creation of a public gay presence. The Metropolitan Community Church, a consciously gay and lesbian Christian fellowship, provided the missing element. This avenue for gay resistance was unavailable before 1968, when defrocked Pentecostal preacher Troy Perry founded the Universal Fellowship of Metropolitan Community Churches (UFMCC) in Los Angeles. Such a church-based liberation movement particularly appealed to residents of St. Louis, a conservative midwestern city bordering the “Bible Belt.” From 1973 to 1980, the Metropolitan Community Church of Greater St. Louis (MCC-St. Louis) played a leading role in creating and sustaining a publicly recognized homophile movement.

Some organizational activity did occur before UFMCC minister Carol Cureton founded MCC-St. Louis in 1973. In April 1969, for example, eight St. Louisans gathered to form the Mandrake Society, which was loosely connected to the Mattachine Society, a national homophile organization founded in Los Angeles in 1950 by teacher and artist Harry Hay. By the end of the summer of 1969, the organization had only eighteen dues-paying members, who met twice a month at Trinity Episcopal Church in the Central West End.⁵

Following the arrest of nine men in drag outside a gay bar on Halloween night 1969, Mandrake members were alerted via the phone chain they had established for just such emergencies. By 3:00 a.m., two dozen activists had arrived at St. Louis police headquarters to work for the release of the men, who had been charged with illegal masquerading, despite the fact that it was Halloween. Unable to solicit the help of the St. Louis chapter of the ACLU,

Mandrake alone aided in the men's defense. Ultimately, the city dropped all charges.⁶

This “mass” arrest of homosexuals stirred some homosexual St. Louisans to action; the November meeting of Mandrake, coming the month following the arrests, saw 150 in attendance; by January 1970, approximately 100 people had joined the St. Louis Mandrake chapter.⁷ Within a few weeks of the new year, however, a conservative coup at a Mandrake Society election ousted from the board the student activists who had founded the organization. The conservative takeover involved suburbanites who wanted a less visible, less confrontational organization. Mandrake's effectiveness as an institution for social change diminished following the installation of the new leadership, and within a couple of years the organization faded away.⁸

In the fall of 1970, a few gay students at Washington University—some of whom had been among the activist leaders removed from the board of Mandrake—formed a Gay Liberation Front, perhaps the first student homophile group in the Midwest.⁹ That organization also fractured under tensions between confrontational radicals and moderates who wanted to maintain respectability while working for gradual change. In the spring of 1971 the Gay Liberation Front split; it dissolved completely by the end of the year. The following year, a handful of gay men organized Gay Patrol, a group which patrolled the parks attempting to prevent gay-bashing incidents. However, Gay Patrol never amounted to more than a handful of individuals, and it also folded in the mid-1970s.¹⁰

Finally, in the early and mid-1970s, a group called the Lesbian Alliance began promoting lesbian-feminist causes; among its many activities was the publication of a booklet entitled “Homophile Community and the Law: Rights We Don't Have,” which was distributed to various organizations including the Eastern Missouri American Civil Liberties Union. The Lesbian Alliance, however, also folded in the mid-1970s without having successfully focused the attention of St. Louis at large on the needs of the homosexual community.¹¹

Besides these few exceptions, St. Louis' gay landscape prior to 1973 consisted of little more than “the baths, bushes and parks,” according to one gay

man who has lived in St. Louis since the early 1960s. His partner of twenty-nine years and a resident of St. Louis since 1964 affirmed, "You could be gay, but you had to be in the closet." Gay bars were the prime method of contact with other gay people during this period, but they "had no political activity within them," according to Lisa Wagaman, a resident of St. Louis since 1972.¹² Fear of exposure caused gay and lesbian St. Louisans to remain an invisible minority. The creation of a public gay organization in the gay-oppressive atmosphere of 1960s St. Louis would have been difficult, according to two gay men who remember the period: "We [gays and lesbians] were not ready for that. We couldn't have coped with it. It was still too new then."¹³

Then came MCC-St. Louis, which assumed a role similar to that of other religious institutions active in American social movements, from the African American civil rights movement to the peace movement. As one student of the role churches played in the African American civil rights movement explained, as the "source of . . . universal humanistic values," religion often provided "strength that can come from believing one is carrying out God's will in political matters."¹⁴ Additionally, according to sociologist Laud Humphreys, who both studied and participated in the St. Louis gay rights movement in the late 1960s, gay churches, "due to the nation's tradition of religious freedom . . . enjoy[ed] some protection from legal and social stigma."¹⁵

Given this history, it was possible for gay churches to overcome the fears of gays and lesbians to create a strong, vocal organization. Gay churches could provide protection (tax-exempt even) for gay political and educational work. This was certainly the case with MCC-St. Louis, which provided an institutional base for many of the organizing activities undertaken by the St. Louis gay community. As Wilbur Wegener, a St. Louis resident since 1962, contends, MCC not only provided "a place to meet" but allowed gay St. Louis to safely "come together under the cover of religion."¹⁶ It was the Reverend Carol Cureton who brought this opportunity to St. Louis, arriving to found MCC-St. Louis only weeks after anti-homosexual militants bombed the first UFMCC church in Los

Angeles, where Cureton had received her training.

Born in Poplar Bluff, Missouri, in 1946, Cureton graduated from Poplar Bluff High School in 1964 and from Southeast Missouri State College in 1968 with a degree in biology and chemistry. Shortly after commencement, she moved to Los Angeles and married a man she had met the previous year; her marriage ended in divorce in 1971. Following her divorce, she embraced her lesbianism, but not knowing where to meet other lesbians, she felt "very alone, and very isolated and very afraid—not able to talk to another human being on this earth."¹⁷

Ultimately she made contact with the Gay Women's Services Center in Los Angeles, later remembering her arrival at the first meeting as "the most frightening moment in my life." Shortly thereafter she came across a small advertisement announcing the service schedule of MCC-Los Angeles tacked to a bulletin board at the Gay Women's Services Center.¹⁸ Cureton had been raised with a sense of religious conviction but had cast it aside during college, partly in the spirit of rebellion and, she recognized many years later, partly due to her sexual orientation. With the option of attending a gay and lesbian fellowship, she decided to return to church.

She felt filled with anxiety on her first Sunday at MCC-Los Angeles: "I was afraid I wouldn't fit in, afraid that it would be just like any other church that I ever walked into, afraid that the police would be outside taking my license number down."¹⁹ But when the service ended, she was satisfied that she had found a church to which she could belong without lying or compromising her sense of self. That Sunday was a "great, fun, joyous experience." Comfortable with UFMCC's theology and its affirmation of gay and lesbian individuals as Christians, Cureton began attending services regularly. Shortly thereafter she became a member of the UFMCC's Exhorter (student clergy) program and soon made her way to St. Louis.²⁰

On arriving in St. Louis, Cureton commenced missionary work in the local gay and lesbian bars, distributing her card to patrons and posting flyers announcing the organization of a church that would not discriminate against



The Berea Presbyterian Church, 3010 Olive Street, first meeting place of the Metropolitan Community Church. Photograph by Wilbur Wegener, 1975. © Wilbur Wegener, 1994.

homosexuals. Committed to calling St. Louis homosexuals out of their closets and into the first consciously gay and lesbian church fellowship in American history, Cureton also hoped to encourage homosexuals to become more public in demanding their rights as citizens of the United States. To make this possible, she wanted to build a community whose members could more freely present themselves in the "overground" as both homosexuals and Christians.²¹

Cureton also approached area churches in search of a meeting place. After several churches refused her the use of their sanctuaries, the Berea Presbyterian Church at 3010 Olive Street, a racially integrated church with progressive leadership, approved her request to hold services there. The first homosexual church meeting in the history of St. Louis occurred at that church at 2:00 p.m. on October 28, 1973. Ten people were present.²²

Many early members of MCC-St. Louis stumbled upon the flyers announcing the creation of the church while spending an evening in the local gay bars. Lisa Wagaman recalled: "I had a strong religious background from a child, and felt it was something missing in my life. . . . When I heard about MCC I decided that was a place where I could go and I would feel comfortable—and I was."²³

Other gays and lesbians were reluctant to attend MCC. Recalling bar raids and other forms of police harassment, they feared reprisals for appearing in daylight at a "homosexual" church. Indeed, four months after the church was organized, Cureton reported that some prospective members "still fear that a cop will be outside the church door taking down names."²⁴ Nevertheless, as news of the church spread, the number of people attending services grew.

Operating as an open secret for five months, MCC's first widely publicized meeting occurred on March 11, 1974. That evening, UFMCC founder, the Reverend Troy Perry, addressed a group of nearly three hundred, the largest gathering of St. Louis gays and lesbians outside of a social function to that time. Declaring that "God does not want you to change that part of you which he created," Reverend Perry encouraged audience members to go forth into the community at large as witnesses to that fact. Never before had homosexuals in St. Louis been encouraged so boldly to leave a gay-friendly environment to mingle, as homosexuals, in the non-gay world.²⁵ That evening five people embraced Perry's and Cureton's revolutionary understanding of God's love, coming to the altar to dedicate their lives to Christ as gay Christians. The next day, stories on the service ran in both the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* and the *St. Louis Globe-Democrat*. Under the headline "Homosexuals Gather for Church Meeting," the *Post-Dispatch* reported that the congregation responded to Reverend Perry's sermon with "Amen" and "Praise the Lords."²⁶

MCC preached the born-again experience and performed full immersion baptisms for new members. Although raised a Southern Baptist, Reverend Cureton quickly adopted an ecumenical liturgy to accommodate members from all religious backgrounds. In a letter given to visitors, MCC-St. Louis described itself as an "ecumenical Christian Church with a ministry of special emphasis toward the Gay Community." However, no person would be excluded from its services, regardless of "age, sex, national origin, race, socio-economic status or sexual preference."²⁷ Cureton's 1975 Easter Sunday sermon provides a good example of MCC-St. Louis' message in the early years: "So we have through our history, victims of religion, not victims of God—

victims of people and religion . . . but God does not turn anyone away. . . . [MCC] must proclaim to the world that He is risen. Let us proclaim it anew to everyone without exclusion," preached Cureton, "to the person in the bars, to the person behind the closed doors of this community, gay and non-gay alike."²⁸

MCC's mission, however, extended beyond the construction of a spiritual community. It became a growing social and political organization for the area's Christian and non-Christian homosexuals, individuals described as "Friends of MCC." Wilbur Wegener, for example, considers himself an atheist, yet he was an early supporter of the church. According to Wegener, the creation of a gay church provided a safe and effective way for the St. Louis gay and lesbian community to make its presence known, and the existence of the church strengthened individual lesbians and gays in such a way that many of them began the difficult process of publicly acknowledging their homosexuality. Once they had done so, gay and lesbian St. Louisans increasingly began to involve themselves in the gay rights struggle. As MCC member Galen Moon wrote to the *Post-Dispatch* in the autumn of 1974:

In St. Louis you have a thriving unity of the Metropolitan Community Church with a growing outreach program aimed at helping the gay people in the area . . . into their full rights as citizens. . . . As the thousands of gay people in the area join together in the effort to enjoy lives free of the oppressions . . . and discriminations we now suffer from the press, the clergy and the government, their needs and rights will have to be honored. This letter is only the beginning of public airings of our resentment and refusal to continue to silently suffer harassment and abuse.²⁹

According to the Milwaukee-based *GPU News*, a publication of that city's Gay People's Union which sent correspondents to St. Louis to experience the church firsthand, MCC-St. Louis had sparked a sense of community and by the fall of 1974 had emerged as the "spiritual, social and political center" of St. Louis' gay community: "As a sense of community grows, sparked by MCC, there can be little doubt that

more will come." Creating a community of gays and lesbians had been, of course, Reverend Cureton's mission when she arrived in St. Louis less than a year earlier.³⁰

The community created by MCC was not one in which all gay St. Louisans participated; many of the area's gays and lesbians never attended a service. The congregation overwhelmingly consisted of white working- or lower-middle-class urbanites. While some black St. Louisans joined MCC, their numbers were small. And, with exceptions (Galen Moon, for example, was in his seventies), most MCC members were in their early twenties to mid-forties.³¹

Although church membership consisted of nearly equal numbers of women and men, in the 1970s MCC was a women-led congregation: Cureton's primary supporters in the church's leadership were women. The board of directors carefully maintained gender equity; however, some male MCC members felt that the church was too oriented toward lesbians and that on occasion men's issues were overlooked. Others active in the lesbian community at the time, Laura A. Moore, for example—who was never involved with MCC—believed



Lesbian activist Laura A. Moore, who in the mid-1970s co-authored the pamphlet *"Homophile Community and the Law: Rights We Don't Have."* Photograph, 1973. Courtesy of Laura A. Moore.



The first permanent home of the Metropolitan Community Church at 5108 Waterman. Photograph by Wilbur Wegener, 1975. © Wilbur Wegener, 1994.

MCC to have been "very male dominated." According to Moore, MCC was not that attractive to lesbians, while it did create "excitement in the male community."³²

On December 23, 1974, with nearly 150 worshippers, the church left Berea Presbyterian Church and moved to its own building at 5108 Waterman Boulevard. The acquisition of this property from the St. Louis Theosophical Society "mark[ed] the first time in Missouri that any self-proclaimed homosexual group has owned its own facilities."³³

The dedication ceremonies took place in mid-1975. Once again, UFMCC founder Troy Perry addressed the St. Louis congregation, urging its members to express their homosexuality publicly and to be proud of who they were: "Gay liberation is knowing who you are, and what you are, and knowing that you have every right to exist in this time and this period in this Universe, and you don't have to apologize to anybody for that. That's real liberation. . . . That's exactly the attitude that you have to have in Missouri. Don't let them off the hook for a minute."³⁴

MCC's three-story Victorian building became the nearest thing to a gay community center St. Louis had ever known. To passersby it looked like just another Central West End residence. Inside, however, it housed a large auditorium that comfortably seated about 250 people as well as additional meeting rooms and offices on each of the three floors and in the basement. These gay-friendly rooms served as the birthplaces of several gay and lesbian institutions in St. Louis.³⁵

The most successful organization to emerge from MCC was the Metropolitan Life Services Corporation (MLSC). Created as an organization dedicated to gay liberation, MLSC was envisioned as a secular MCC. Although the organization later changed its name to Mid-Continent Life Services Corporation to avoid a lawsuit from Metropolitan Life Insurance Company, MLSC originally associated itself with the Metropolitan Community Church by using the word "metropolitan" in its name. Formalizing the connection between the two organizations, the MCC board pledged its support for MLSC, approved MLSC's name and mission, and offered the organization office space in the church's basement.³⁶

Within a few months of its mid-1975 organizational meeting, MLSC commenced publication of a newsletter called *Prime Time*, which kept readers up-to-date on all national and local events that affected homosexuals. It created the first guide to St. Louis' gay and lesbian organizations, including a detailed listing and explanation of the meeting places in the various St. Louis parks and the precautions to take when visiting them ("Extreme caution is advised here, for the police occasionally use entrapment methods"). *Prime Time* also offered advice to its readers on other topics, like this admonishment which appeared in nearly every issue: "STRAIGHT OR GAY, IF YOU'RE PROMISCUOUS, GET A BLOOD TEST EVERY 90 DAYS!"³⁷

MLSC's greatest contribution to St. Louis' gays and lesbians, however, was the establishment of the Gay Hotline. For the first time ever, any St. Louisan with a phone could make contact with homosexuals in the area through the Gay Hotline. The first Sunday of operation, 323 calls were made to the number advertised in the

personals column of the *Post-Dispatch*; the following week, MLSC members answered an average of 188 calls per day.³⁸

Overwhelmed by the community's interest, MLSC soon moved from Waterman to its own facilities at 4746 McPherson (and later to 4940 McPherson). During its years on McPherson, MLSC organized St. Louis' first gay community center. The Center, as it was called, opened its doors each day from 9:00 a.m. until 11:00 p.m. and provided services ranging from rap sessions and counseling services to a community library, a community bulletin board, an MLSC Blood Bank program, Friday night feminist women's coffeehouses (called "Womenspace"), and Saturday night mixed-gender coffeehouses, scheduled so as not to interfere with MCC's Friday night coffeehouse. In addition, any night of the week, lesbian and gay St. Louisans

Right: *The Metropolitan Life Services Corporation (later the Mid-Continent Life Services Corporation), 4940 McPherson. Photograph by Wilbur Wegener, 1976. © Wilbur Wegener, 1994.*

Below: *The recreation room at MLSC Community Center. Photograph by Wilbur Wegener, 1976. © Wilbur Wegener, 1994.*



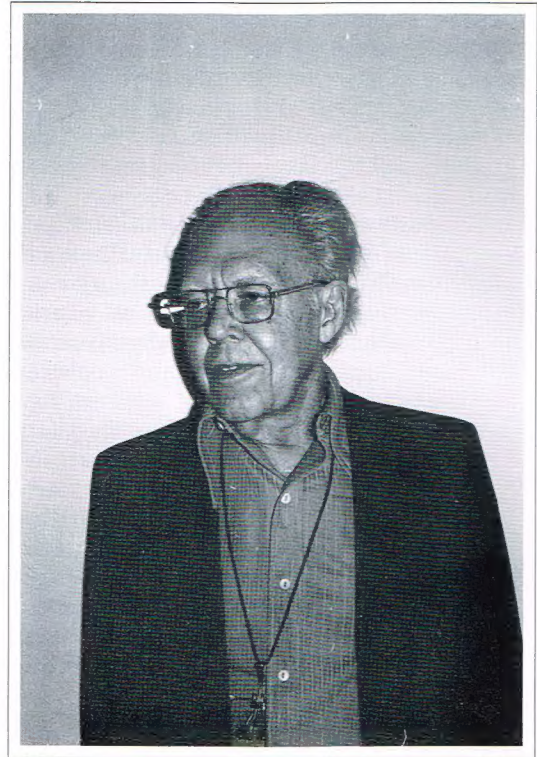
could attend the Center to play pool, pinball, and other games, eat at the snack bar, dance, listen to the jukebox, and occasionally enjoy live music.³⁹

The Center's activities did not supplant the community work carried on by MCC, which also provided a variety of programs for gay St. Louisans. In addition to worship services, MCC sponsored Bible study groups, a women's counseling group, peer counseling groups, Alcoholics Together and Alanon, rap groups, a youth group, a lending library, and a Christian social action committee. Additionally, MCC's Friday Night Coffee House served as an alternative to the bars. Bill Cordes, a leader in the gay community since the late 1970s and the founding owner of the St. Louis gay and lesbian bookstore Our World Too, remembers the MCC coffeeshouse as "a big thing in the community for a long time."⁴⁰

As Lisa Wagaman explained, MCC provided the "impetus for the community—to get things going." In addition, MCC confronted the non-gay world on behalf of all gay St. Louisans. Wagaman asserts: "If there was something going on in the gay community, if there was some gay issue, the focus was always on MCC—what are they doing about it? What does MCC say about it?"⁴¹

The need for an organization that would speak out on behalf of the gay and lesbian community was never more apparent than in 1977, when singer Anita Bryant led an attack against homosexuals in Florida. Believing that "militant" homosexuality threatened the very foundation of American society, Anita Bryant and other conservative leaders in Dade County, Florida, organized the Save Our Children campaign to reverse a pro-gay rights county commission vote that had added sexual orientation to Dade County's non-discrimination policies. Bryant appeared on Christian evangelist television shows, including Pat Robertson's *700 Club* and Jim and Tammy Bakker's *PTL Club*, where she explained: "We are in the middle of a battle that the Lord opened my eyes to. . . . Homosexuals want to come out of the closet. We are not against homosexuals, but we are against the act."⁴²

The Save Our Children initiative campaign galvanized gays and lesbians across the country. In St. Louis, MCC-St. Louis, MLSC, and other gay and gay-friendly organizations mobilized against



Galen Moon, early member of MCC and founder of MLSC. Photograph by Wilbur Wegener, 1975. © Wilbur Wegener, 1994.

the anti-homosexual agenda of Anita Bryant and her allies. And, in fact, the struggle against Bryant boosted gay and lesbian organizing in St. Louis. According to Bill Cordes, it provided "a training ground for a lot of people who became [St. Louis] activists later." The events in Florida created the realization that St. Louis needed a "unified community of gays" to begin "networking" with communities in other cities in order to defeat such measures.⁴³ While existing gay-friendly organizations mobilized, Rick Garcia also founded the St. Louis Task Force for Human Rights, specifically geared toward raising money for pro-gay forces in Dade County. A thousand people attended one task force fund raiser, a benefit screening at the Maplewood Theatre on Manchester of a film about homosexuality, *A Very Natural Thing*.⁴⁴

Despite mass pro-gay mobilization throughout the country, the Save Our Children initiative passed, repealing Dade County's sexual orientation protection with 69.3 percent of the vote. In response, New York, San Francisco, and Chicago anti-discrimination forces held mass rallies and candlelight vigils, where

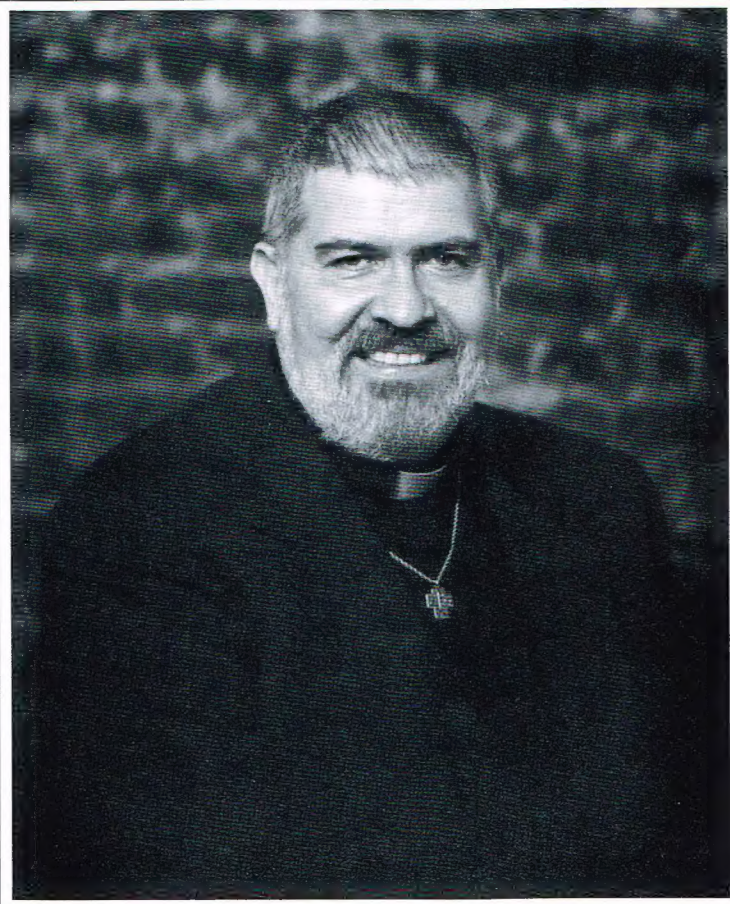
participants shouted gay rights slogans.⁴⁵ Two days after the June 7, 1977, election, MCC hosted St. Louis' Second Annual Gay Pride Rally. The standing-room-only crowd of over three hundred was addressed by Reverend Cureton, four leaders of the St. Louis gay community, and two out-of-town leaders, including Reverend Troy Perry, who had just come from Florida, where he had spoken out against the Anita Bryant campaign.

While acknowledging the serious setback, the speakers at the rally expressed their continued determination to win human rights for gay people. In her introductory remarks, Reverend Cureton declared that "your very presence here is a statement that the election in Dade County . . . does not mean that gay people are going back into the closet!" The crowd cheered.⁴⁶

The predominantly gay and lesbian audience responded loudly to Rick Garcia's announcement that "solidarity . . . is the key . . . to gaining our rights. No legislator is going to give us our rights. We have to take those rights. We have to stand up and be counted. We have to say, 'We are here. We are good. We are important, and we deserve what is ours! Human rights are God-given rights!'"⁴⁷

Jim Alexander, board member of Dignity-St. Louis (an organization of St. Louis Catholic homosexuals founded in 1974, which met once a month at MCC) also addressed the crowd. A transplanted Bostonian, Alexander sounded eerily like Senator Robert Kennedy the night he comforted the crowd in Indianapolis following the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. Provoking a deep sense of reverence among the crowd, Alexander spoke of the events of the past week: "This past week has been a week of many emotions, many different emotions: It's been a week of despair and despondency and anger and maybe even of hope." He ended with a prophecy: "We are presently in the seed time of gay rights. We're planting the trees . . . that will eventually bear fruit for our future generations."⁴⁸

Septuagenarian Galen Moon, founder of MLSC, declared: "I've known loneliness and I've known ridicule." Looking upon the newly formed gay groups in St. Louis, he commented: "I dream now of all gay groups and individuals getting together . . . and getting rid of the lies and myths . . . and coming out



Rev. Troy Perry, founder of the Universal Fellowship of Metropolitan Community Churches. Photograph, 1994. Courtesy of UFMCC.

on top." Moon ended his exhortation by encouraging the gay and lesbian people of St. Louis and Missouri to continue to work to "change the situation in this state."⁴⁹

The last speaker was the featured guest, Reverend Troy Perry. Declaring that "gay people have come to a crossroads in our country," he spoke defiantly and with boldness: "If we don't rock the boat, things aren't going to change in America. . . . Every time the Anita Bryant forces go around and try to say we can't hold jobs, maybe tomorrow we all ought to quit working and bring this country to its knees! . . . Gay people are not going back to the closets. . . . We're going to have a non-violent revolution in this country and we're going to smother the Anita Bryants in love!"⁵⁰

Cureton closed St. Louis' Second Annual Gay Pride Rally, agreeing that the "gay movement for human liberation"

would ultimately prove successful: "We're going to be a free people!" She called the audience to its feet; the rally ended with a loud, soul-felt rendition of all four verses of "We Shall Overcome."⁵¹

A few weeks after this rally, the *Post-Dispatch* ran a lengthy article on the gay and lesbian movement in St. Louis. The author wrote that lesbian and gay St. Louis was "not nearly so well-organized as their counterparts in Washington, San Francisco, New York or Boston"; nevertheless, because of the recent organizational accomplishments of St. Louis' homosexuals, "Anita Bryant's antihomosexual Save Our Children crusade could turn out to be the best thing that has happened to the St. Louis homosexual community in years."⁵²

However, the 1977 Gay Pride Rally proved to be the last large political event hosted by MCC for many years. Four months after the rally, Cureton departed St. Louis to serve the UFMCC in Los Angeles as clerk of the board of elders. Lisa Wagaman recalls Cureton's departure as "traumatic" for the church. According to Wagaman, "a lot of people left MCC because of Carol Cureton's leaving."⁵³

Over the next three years, MCC had three ministers; the lack of continuity within the church made it nearly impossible to present a united front to the gay community and the rest of St. Louis. MCC continued to serve as a meeting place for gay groups, including the Catholic organization Dignity-St. Louis, Washington University's student group, and many others. As the decade closed, however, they no longer took an active part in building the community.

In addition to the pastoral turmoil at MCC, the year following the Dade County defeat was not kind to gay and lesbian America or gay St. Louis. In 1978 Anita Bryant launched a nationwide campaign to repeal laws and ordinances designed to protect lesbians and gays from discrimination. Within months anti-gay rights forces were successful in Wichita, Kansas; St. Paul, Minnesota; and Eugene, Oregon. In November 1978, George Moscone, mayor of San Francisco, and Harvey Milk, San Francisco's first openly gay supervisor, were assassinated by the only San Francisco supervisor who voted against their non-discrimination ordinance for gays and lesbians.⁵⁴

In St. Louis the Task Force for Human Rights folded a few months after the Dade County defeat. The Mid-Continent Life Services Corporation ceased publication of *Gay St. Louis* (its successor to *Prime Time*) and in March 1978 moved to a smaller location at 10 South Euclid in an attempt to stay afloat financially. In October 1978 MLSC formally voted to cease operations, and the first self-proclaimed gay community center in St. Louis faded into history. Also in October 1978 a young gay man was shot in the back of the head in Forest Park; he was found dead hours later.⁵⁵

While MCC's leadership stabilized in 1980 with the arrival of the Reverend P. Thomas Jordan, it never regained its primary position in the community. During his tenure Jordan deliberately steered the church away from politics, and MCC ceased to act as a religious/political institution and became more narrowly religious. As Jim Thomas described the transformation, MCC "turned . . . inward [and] became more churchy. There really was a withdrawal from a sense of social ministry, and going much more back to a sense of Christian evangelical ministry."⁵⁶

Furthermore, MCC abandoned the Waterman location in 1984, removing itself from the Central West End, an area of the city where gays and lesbians often gathered. MCC moved to Lafayette Square into a church on 1120 Dolman, previously home to the St. Mary's Assumption Ukrainian Rite congregation. Some viewed the new location as less safe than the Central West End, and as the new building had much less space for meeting rooms than the Waterman church, the move ended MCC's de facto role as a community center. Subsequently, MCC lost (or left) its position as community leader. Without an activist MCC and in the face of other setbacks, the gay communities of St. Louis floundered in the early and mid-1980s.⁵⁷

Nevertheless, MCC accomplished much during its early years. As a focal point for the gay communities of St. Louis, MCC provided the impetus necessary to foster a visible, above-ground community of gays and lesbians. Cordes comments that

MCC played a very crucial role in the beginnings of the community



here because . . . it was the first non-bar space that had a telephone and an address and someplace you could go that wasn't a bar, that wasn't a post office box. It was a gathering place for those people who couldn't drink or couldn't go into the bars or didn't like them or wanted to be able to have a conversation where the music wasn't blaring. It gave a different direction than the bar did. . . . MCC . . . became a community center, a networking center; it was where we politicked. It provided space for the hotline when nobody else would. It was a catalyst for community organizations to start. It was an essential part of this community growing. . . . They have been the catalyst for an awful lot going on in this community.⁵⁸

Several gay institutions of lasting importance began during MCC's period of community activism. Washington University's Gay Students Concerned (a re-emergence of their student group) organized Gay Pride Week on its campus in 1979. In April 1980, the city's first Gay Pride March was held. *No Bad*

Above: *Marchers in the 1980 Gay Pride March and Rally. Photograph by Wilbur Wegener, 1980. Missouri Historical Society Photograph and Print Collection. © Wilbur Wegener, 1980.*

Below: *Jim Thomas, chair of the committee that organized the 1980 Gay Pride March and Rally, and founder of the Lesbian and Gay News-Telegraph. Photograph, 1979. Courtesy of Jim Thomas.*



News, a newspaper aimed at the gay communities, was founded in 1980; a year later, in October 1981, the first issue of the *Lesbian and Gay News-Telegraph* (then called the *Gay News-Telegraph*) hit the stands, distributing five thousand copies.⁵⁹ Its editor, Jim Thomas, who entered St. Louis' gay community in 1977 during what he refers to as "Dade County Summer," was destined to become a leader of the gay community from the early 1980s onward. Thomas contends that "merely . . . the fact that [MCC] existed . . . was of absolutely vital importance. . . . You were thankful that they were there whether you wanted to attend their church or not, or believed the way they did. It just had such a symbolic importance."⁶⁰

MCC was not solely responsible for creating an open gay community in St. Louis. Without question, the social and political changes in America during

the 1960s and 1970s impacted all of St. Louis, including gay St. Louis. The civil rights movement, the women's movement, the national gay rights movement, and post-pill, pre-AIDS sexual liberalization all played a role in creating the possibility of an open gay community and, in fact, made MCC possible. Nevertheless, MCC provided the necessary catalyst. When it arrived the city's gay landscape was practically barren. After a seven-year role as a creating and sustaining institution of the gay community, MCC backed away; nevertheless, the "children" of MCC lived on and struggled for gay rights throughout the 1980s. By 1993 they had mustered the degree of political clout and social legitimacy that made it possible for them to bring the mayor to Forest Park. It was the Metropolitan Community Church of the 1970s, however, which wrote the first lines on the mayoral invitation.

I want to thank Gerda W. Ray, Frances L. Hoffmann, and John Works of the University of Missouri-St. Louis, Gail Egleston and Harold Austin, colleagues at Mehlville High School, and Martha Kohl, editor of *Gateway Heritage*, for their support and criticisms of this paper. In addition, I want to express my thanks to the Western Historical Manuscript Collection at the University of Missouri-St. Louis and to those who took the time to answer my never-ending strings of questions: Jim Thomas, Bill Cordes, Lisa Wagaman, Brad Wishon, Laura A. Moore, Wilbur Wegener, two anonymous informants, and, of course, Carol Cureton.

1. *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, June 28, 1993; the *Lesbian and Gay News-Telegraph*, July 1993. St. Louis police estimated that twenty-five hundred people attended the festival; the *News-Telegraph* put the estimate at six thousand. The *News-Telegraph* is well known for attempting to get as accurate as possible an accounting of individuals at various events; its editor literally stands off to the side and counts.
2. Interview with Bill Cordes, St. Louis, September 22, 1993. Unless otherwise noted, all interviews were conducted by the author and cassettes from them remain in his possession.
3. Margaret Cruikshank, *The Gay and Lesbian Liberation Movement* (New York, 1992), p. 30. See also Andrea

Weiss and Greta Schiller, *Before Stonewall: The Making of a Gay and Lesbian Community* (Tallahassee, Fla., 1988).

4. Cruikshank, *The Gay and Lesbian Liberation Movement*, pp. 69, 149.
5. Laud Humphreys, *Out of the Closets: The Sociology of Homosexual Liberation* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ, 1972), pp. 82-83; John D'Emilio, *Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities: The Making of a Homosexual Minority in the United States, 1940-1970* (Chicago, 1982), p. 60.
6. Humphreys, *Out of the Closets*, pp. 85-89; *Gay St. Louis* 4 (July/August 1978), p. 15, in collection 545, folder 267, Western Historical Manuscript Collection, University of Missouri-St. Louis (hereafter WHMC-St. Louis).
7. Humphreys, *Out of the Closets*, p. 90.
8. *Ibid.*, pp. 90-94.
9. *Ibid.*, pp. 8, 93.
10. *Gay St. Louis* 4 (July/August 1978), p. 15.
11. Interview with Laura A. Moore, St. Louis, August 26, 1994.
12. Interview with informants Art and Paul, St. Louis, November 16, 1993 (no last names are given because these individuals asked to retain their anonymity); interview with Lisa Wagaman, St. Louis, October 21, 1993.
13. Art and Paul, interview.
14. Gary T. Marx, *Protest and Preju-*

dice: A Study of Belief in the Black Community (Westport, CT, 1967), pp. 94-95.

15. Humphreys, *Out of the Closets*, p. 152.
16. Interview with Wilbur Wegener, St. Louis, May 26, 1994.
17. Telephone interview with Carol Cureton, November 13, 1993; *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, February 28, 1974; Remarks by Rev. Carol Cureton at Gay Pride Rally, MCC-St. Louis, June 9, 1977, recording in the private collection of Lisa Wagaman (hereafter cited as Wagaman Collection.)
18. Cureton, interview; Cureton at Gay Pride Rally, 1977, recording in Wagaman Collection.
19. Cureton, interview. Sermon of Rev. Carol Cureton at Berea Presbyterian Church, St. Louis, December 16, 1974, recording in Wagaman Collection.
20. Cureton, interview.
21. *Ibid.*; *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, February 28, 1974.
22. *In Unity* 5 (October 15, 1975), p. 5, in collection 542, folder 47, WHMC-St. Louis.
23. Wagaman, interview.
24. *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, February 28, 1974.
25. *Ibid.*, March 12, 1974; *St. Louis Globe-Democrat*, March 12, 1974. Reverend Perry also admonished the crowd to "learn to love yourself."
26. *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, March 12, 1974; *St. Louis Globe-Democrat*,

March 12, 1974.

27. Cureton, interview; *GPU News*, September 1974, in collection 542, folder 45, WHMC-St. Louis.

28. Sermon by Rev. Carol Cureton, March 20, 1975, MCC-St. Louis, recording in Wagaman Collection.

29. *The New Light* 1 (September 1974), in collection 545, folder 285, WHMC-St. Louis. This letter to the editor was written and published in the church's newsletter, *The New Light*; I have been unable to determine if the *Post-Dispatch* also published it.

30. *GPU News*, September 1974.

31. Hard statistics on sex, class, and ethnic background are difficult to uncover. The demographic generalizations contained in this paragraph were compiled from information from the interviews I conducted. A *Globe-Democrat* story on the church suggests a slightly different demographic profile. It reported, "The congregation was of all ages, black and white, male and female." *St. Louis Globe-Democrat*, March 12, 1974.

32. Art and Paul, interview; Moore, interview.

33. *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, May 30, 1975. In addition to the need for a building to accommodate the growing congregation, protests arose among Berea members concerning the gay church in their midst when the press began to carry articles linking their church's name with MCC.

34. Sermon by Troy Perry during dedication of Waterman building, MCC-St. Louis, May 30, 1975, recording in Wagaman Collection.

35. Description provided in Wagaman interview. The building on Waterman, currently a private residence, was also toured by the author on March 12, 1994.

36. *Prime Time* 1 (November 1, 1975), in collection 545, folder 309, WHMC-St. Louis.

37. *Prime Time* 3 (July 1977), pp. 2, 27, in collection 545, folder 311, WHMC-St. Louis.

38. *Prime Time* 1 (November 1, 1975). According to a story in *Prime Time* 3 (January 1977), there were 232 calls that first Sunday. The hotline opened Wednesday, October 15, 1975. That day, a two-line ad appeared in the personals column of the *Post-Dispatch*. The ad read: "MLSC Gay Hotline, 367-0084."

39. *Prime Time* 1 (November 1, 1975); *Prime Time* 3 (January 1977), pp. 30, 31.

40. List of programs recited by Rev. Carol Cureton at the dedication of the Waterman building, MCC-St. Louis, May 31, 1975, recording in Wagaman Collection. Other programs mentioned were a twenty-four-hour crisis/referral

line, handicapped ministries, and ongoing community relations and public education. Cordes, interview.

41. Wagaman, interview.

42. Anita Bryant, *The Anita Bryant Story: The Survival of Our Nation's Families and the Threat of Militant Homosexuality* (Old Tappan, NJ, 1977), pp. 41-42.

43. Cordes, interview.

44. Rick Garcia's speech at Gay Pride Rally, MCC-St. Louis, June 9, 1977, recording in Wagaman Collection; *Prime Time* 3 (June 1977), p. 9, in collection 545, folder 311, WHMC-St. Louis. According to Garcia, in addition to the movie, the Task Force organized two beer blasts attended by 150 and 200 people.

45. Bryant, *The Anita Bryant Story*, pp. 125-27.

46. Cureton at Gay Pride Rally, 1977, recording in Wagaman Collection.

47. Garcia at Gay Pride Rally, *ibid*.

48. Remarks by Jim Alexander at Gay Pride Rally, *ibid*.

49. Remarks by Galen Moon at Gay Pride Rally, *ibid*.

50. Remarks by Rev. Troy Perry at Gay Pride Rally, *ibid*; *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, June 11, 1977.

51. Cureton at Gay Pride Rally, 1977, recording in Wagaman Collection.

52. *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, June 19, 1977.

53. Wagaman, interview.

54. *Gay Life Magazine* 1 (Fall 1978), pp. 22, 30, in collection 545, folder 265, WHMC-St. Louis.

55. *Ibid*; *Gay St. Louis* 4 (July/August 1978), pp. 15, 30.

56. Interview with Jim Thomas, St. Louis, September 30, 1993.

57. Interview with Rev. Brad Wishon, St. Louis, November 10, 1993; Cordes, interview. Information about the church's relocation can be found in *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, August 17, 1984.

58. Cordes, interview.

59. Thomas, interview; Cordes, interview. Other gay organizations created in the 1970s were Dignity-St. Louis (an organization for gay Catholics), Integrity-St. Louis (an organization for gay Episcopalians), Lutherans Concerned, and Gay Academic Union. Groups which had met or continued to meet at MCC in the early 1980s included Gay Alcoholics Anonymous, Washington University's Concerned Gay Students, Gateway Men's Chorus, Dignity, Parents of Gays, Women's Rap Group, Men's Rap Group, the Gay Hotline, MLSC, Growing American Youth, and Gay Overeaters Anonymous.

60. Thomas, interview.